

# 'It is sad to have Black History Month. . .'

By Michelle Michael  
special writer

Best-selling author Maya Angelou highlighted Black Awareness Month at Rochester's Oakland University Tuesday with eloquent poetry reading and funny true tales, yet wished there were no need for such a month.

"It is sad to have Black History Month. What the ideal is, of course, is to not have it at all."

Angelou said Black Awareness Month will no longer be necessary when all American history, the failures as well as triumphs of blacks and others, are included in American history books.

However, she stated her pleasure at seeing such a mix of people turn out.

"When I look in this room and see the beautiful colors of the faces of the people, and the shapes of the features and the textures of the hair, I am aware that we have a lot to celebrate," Angelou said to an audience of nearly 1,200. "We have a long way to go, but we have a lot to celebrate."

"I NOTICED that the theme of this month . . . is dignity. It is my pleasure to remind you through black American poetry of this sustaining dignity of the human being."

Angelou passionately spun tales of her childhood and of black American

history by reciting love poems, sometimes in song.

"Love is the most important of all the virtues because love sustains. And by love I don't mean mush, nor do I mean sentimentality. I mean that condition in the human spirit so profound it encourages us to develop courage — and to build bridges out of that courage."

WORLD RENOWNED for the autobiography of her childhood, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," Angelou also appears as Kunta Kinte's grandmother in the television film "Roots" and is a civil rights activist and best-selling poet.

Her recitations at Oakland included work from others, such as black American poet Langston Hughes, in which she prefaced his poem with a story of her devastation when a long-time white friend failed to recognize different colors within the black race.

"I realized after 30 years of sisterhood, of arguing together, debating, of crying together, laughing, supporting each other, she couldn't describe me, if my life or hers depended upon it, to save it to say that I'm black."

"You all know that black people range in color from plum blue to milk white," she declared.

Angelou encouraged blacks to

memorize some of the brilliant descriptions Hughes gave in his poem because "they describe you and yours aptly," as well as for whites, "so when next you want to describe a black friend" it will be possible.

Self-love, romantic love and family love poetry were all included in her presentation, and while all touched on aspects of black American history, Angelou used Oscar Brown Jr.'s "Bid Them In" to discuss current human dignity.

"HOW DOES ONE stand erect with that kind of history?" she asked after delivering Brown's poem of a slave auction.

"How can we maintain an inner dignity . . . and that strength and stand erect if everybody's pointing fingers at (everyone else) and saying 'you don't look right, and you don't look right, and you don't look like me, so that is not right.'"

"What it really is is so blithely ignorant, that it's amazing we've stayed alive. I don't mean blacks. I mean blacks and whites" and all cultures throughout the world.

With a strong smile and gentle voice, she encourages all Americans to research on their own.

"Young men and women, this is why I ask you to please go to the library. Ask for these poems. It is amazing that people can actually say they're teaching American Literature and not teach — the greatest poets of the 20th century."

ROCHESTER HIGH School English teacher Jan Kendall said, "I teach it all the time" and was

thrilled to see Angelou speak.

Although Kendall didn't attend the event with a group of her students, other area high schools purchased tickets for the event.

Jill Weiss, 15, of West Bloomfield High School said Angelou made a favorable impression.

"I definitely want to read her," Weiss said.

Classmate Kathleen DeBruin, 15, said that even though she wasn't very familiar with the author, she hopes her teachers will require Angelou's books on their reading lists.

Others in the audience had read Angelou's novels and poems and were moved by her readings.

"I thought it was very interesting," said Rosalind Morgan, 17, of Milford High. "She adds drama to her poetry."

OU student Joel Endres agreed. "I liked her use of poetry and song," said the 21-year-old from Farmington.

Endres and others waited up to a half-hour to catch another glimpse of Angelou in the Oakland Center Gold Room, where a desert reception was set up.

A table with Angelou's books for sale from the University Bookcenter was outside the corridor, which was packed with people patiently waiting to get in.

SOME, LIKE ENDRES, purchased a book and got her autograph, while others snapped a picture. The majority of the group, however, had to settle for one last peek at the author who thanked all for coming and explained she gave it her all in the presentation.



Writer Maya Angelou showed eloquence and humor to the 1,200 people who turned out to see her last week at Oakland University.

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